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# Population Ageing and Family Change: Older people's perceptions of current changes in family composition in rural Nepal

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**Abstract**
Rapid population ageing and massive outmigration have affected the traditional family composition. In villages of the middle hills of western Nepal in particular, outmigration of younger generations has profoundly complicated older people's living conditions. This article sheds light on how the family as a social institution has been influenced by current socio-economic changes linked mainly to ageing and outmigration. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with older people and on group discussions in five different rural villages, the study explores changes and transformations within the family from an emic perspective of older villagers. Changes in the family include modified living arrangements, a redefinition of roles and status, a redistribution of work among family and household members, changes in the attitude of younger people towards older people and a decline in intergenerational care and support. These changes are perceived by the majority of older people as unjust and of no benefit to themselves. Older people find themselves undergoing a transition phase where state provisions remain largely limited and family support is on the decline and no longer guaranteed. Founded on a tacit intergenerational agreement, the family as the major provider of support in old age is falling apart.

**Keywords**: family change, intergenerational contract, Nepal, outmigration, population ageing, societal change

## Introduction

In Nepal, the incessant outmigration of young people and people of working age, particularly from the hill regions, has precipitated population ageing. Outmigration, the dwindling importance of subsistence farming and of land-based resources (eg Paudel et al 2014, Jaquet et al 2016) and the increasing monetarisation of livelihoods have led to changes in the family and the household composition. These developments represent a challenge for older people living in the middle hills of western Nepal. The region has already been described as 'overburdened with the proportion of older people in general' (Subedi 2005: 16), and villages are said to be 'toothless' (Speck 2017: 430), inhabited mainly by old people and very young children. The absence of young people here affects the family and household composition. Multigenerational households where young and old generations live together are on the decline and, consequently, family-based care for older people is no longer guaranteed. Families and society are having to cope with this challenge, which requires a renegotiation of intergenerational contracts.

Few studies about older people and population ageing specifically focus on Nepal. Subedi (1996, 2005) reported the marginal, isolated status of older people in society. More recently, Chalise (2010, 2012) and Ghimire et al (2018) investigated older people's mental well-being and physical health. Yarger and Brauner-Otto (2014), and Korzenevica and Agergaard (2017) looked into the change in receipt of care and support by family members and the renegotiation of intergenerational relations among different family members. KC et al (2014) researched older people's perceptions of the State in relation to social pensions. So far only Pun et al (2009) and Parker and Pant (2009, 2011) have provided a general overview of the current situation regarding older people's living conditions in Nepal.

A wealth of literature about migration addresses the situation of the family that has been left behind, especially the wives and children of migrants. Not as much is known about the implications for older persons within dispersed families. As we will see further on, the few publications that deal with the way migration affects these people's lives and living conditions reveal that it above all has adverse implications for them.

To fill this gap in research, this article sets out to report current

changes in the family composition and intergenerational contracts and the transformation of roles – triggered by a rapid demographic transition, migration and general multifaceted socio-economic change. Inspired by the critical livelihood perspective (Geiser et al 2011), the study adopts an emic approach by focusing on a specific age group. This empirical contribution aims to disclose older people's own experiences and views. It attempts to elucidate how they perceive and assess these changes in the family and the household, the living arrangements, the division of the workload and intergenerational behaviour patterns that affect their lives.

The main research question here is: in what way are intergenerational relations, the tacit contract between parents and children, and attitudes towards and support for older people changing? How do older people perceive these changes? The sub-questions addressed in this article are: what are living arrangements in rural hill villages currently like? How do older people regard the transformation of the socio-economic status of women and especially of the daughter-in-law? How do older people apprehend the shift in roles and responsibilities among family members? How do they feel about the changing attitudes towards them?

To address these questions, the study relies on qualitative interviews with older people from five rural villages in the middle hills of western Nepal. To understand family change, the study refers to the concept of the family as a basic social institution (Giddens 2006, Thornton and Fricke 1987). Furthermore, it draws upon the concept of implicit intergenerational contracts within the family (Croll 2006 p. 487 ff, Kabeer 2000: p. 465). We assume that the family as a basic social institution and its members' intergenerational relations are rapidly changing and that these developments constitute a challenge for older people both in their daily lives and in terms of family-based care. The family can no longer be considered a reliable source of support and care in old age.

By listening to the views of older people, we wish to give voice to them. We are aware that the voices of the younger generation are left unheard in this study. However, older people's views and needs have until recently been overlooked in research and policy-making, not only in Nepal but in the Global South in general.

## Demographic change and outmigration in Nepal

Nepal's population is in the midst of a demographic transition.[1] Though it maintains a large proportion of young people, the country now has an ageing population. The constant outmigration of young people from rural hill areas has precipitated the ageing of Nepal's population.

### *Rapid ageing of the population*

A substantial decline in fertility and mortality, plus a significant increase in life expectancy, characterises the current demographic transition in many countries of the Global South. The consequence of these demographic developments is the ageing of the population (UNDESA 2017). Demographic estimates predict that nearly 80% of all old people (defined as being of 60 years and above) will reside in the Global South in 2050. The proportion of old people in South Asia increased from 5.8% in 1950 to 6.7% in 2000 and to 8.4% in 2015. Forecasts for 2030 predict 12% and 18.9% for 2050 (UNFPA 2017a).

Nepal provides a good example of the fast-changing demographic trends that have taken place over the past three decades. Since records began in 1952 the country has undergone a remarkable decline in fertility and mortality rates, and at the same time a massive increase in life expectancy, which more than doubled to 66.6 years in 2011 (UNFPA 2017b). The current 2.5 million old people amount to 8.6% of Nepal's population (UNDESA 2019). The country still has a large population of young people and people of working age, but the young population (age ≤ 14 years) is declining due to a sustained drop in the birth rate (Amin et al 2017, Feeney et al 2001).

Given this demographic change in Nepal, a rapid ageing of the population is expected. The annual growth rate of the older population (3.59%) is nearly three times the overall population growth rate of 1.35%. Consequently, a rapid ageing of the population has to be anticipated, and a substantial imbalance of the dependency ratio between young and old is thus to be expected (Feeney et al 2001, Subedi 1996).

1 The demographic transition refers to a model that describes a population process that passes through several phases over time, including shifts from high birth and high (infant) death rates of populations to low birth and death rates, and high life expectancy (Thompson 1929).

***Outmigration precipitates population ageing and changes in the family composition***

Migration is not a new phenomenon in Nepal. However, the scale and dimension of migratory movements for work purposes has, despite some fluctuations, increased over the last two decades (Hagen-Zanker et al 2014: 6). The growing body of literature about migration in Nepal addresses migrants and their destinations (eg Bruslé 2008), the remittances they send home (eg Seddon et al 1998, 2002), new forms of multi-local households (eg Thieme et al 2011, Maharjan 2015) and the situation of household and family members who have been left behind (eg Shrestha and Conway 2001, Maharjan et al 2012, Adhikari and Hobley 2015).

Internal rural-to-rural (mainly from the mountains and hills to the lowlands) and rural-to-urban migration has redistributed the population within the country. International migration has reshaped the demographic make-up and local socio-economic structures in many areas, especially in rural areas. The highest proportion (44.81%) of the absent population is from the 15–24 age group. Due to the diverse migration patterns, about half of households from the middle hills of western Nepal are now missing at least one household member (GoN 2012: 38, 2014).

These different generational and partly gendered mobility patterns create multi-local social networks rooted in the family's place of origin (Poertner et al 2011). Forty-five years ago, Macfarlane found that in most cases, at least one male family member of Gurung families was away on military service or had migrated for labour purposes, and he labelled this household composition 'incomplete joint families' (1976: 15). Nowadays, multi-local households are common and may consist, for example, of a father working in Dubai as an unskilled labourer, the mother staying in Pokhara with her two eldest children, earning a small income as a shopkeeper, and the grandparents living with the youngest children in the village and tending the fields. Though the separate household members are linked to each other financially, their daily lives and work are played out at different places and in different familial settings with renegotiated roles and responsibilities (eg Korzenevica and Agergaard 2017).

Although, remarkably, remittances make up more than a quarter

(26.2%) of the country's gross domestic product (GoN 2020) and contribute to the livelihoods of those left behind, economic outmigration depopulates rural hill and mountain regions and complicates the lives of those who remain in the villages.

The comprehensive literature about implications of outmigration emphasises the fact that migration by young people leads to a change in social rules and relations, and to the abandonment of the rural economy (Blaikie et al 2002). The focus lies on the fact that women in general face higher workloads and need to renegotiate roles and responsibilities (eg Shrestha and Conway 2001, Kaspar 2005, Childs et al 2014). Other case studies reveal that the absence of male family members leads to the breakdown of the household – for example if the migrant's wife sets up her own household –, or to households spreading across rural and urban areas (Maharjan 2015), or to separate kitchens under the same roof (Pun et al 2009, Speck 2017).

Publications about how old people's lives are affected by migration indicate that migrants' parents are being neglected both emotionally and financially (Subedi 1996, Yarger and Brauner-Otto 2014): their workload increases (Gautam 2008, Speck 2017) and some of them are even forced to move to old people's homes (Khanal et al 2018). Furthermore, they reveal that a permanent or temporary absence of family members leads to a change in living arrangements: for example to grandparents living with their grandchildren or to old people living alone. This situation has been labelled the 'empty nest syndrome' by Subedi (2005: 13).

**The family as a crumbling social institution for support in old age?**

Universally, a family is 'a group of persons directly linked by kin connections, the adult members of which assume responsibility for caring for children' (Giddens 2006: 206). Informal codes of behaviour and diverse activities allocated to specific members apply in this most basic of social institutions. It is an organised social entity where individuals seek certain common objectives, such as co-residence, socialisation, production and consumption, transfer of property and so on (Thornton and Fricke 1987).

Traditionally, people rely on their family as a major source of support in old age. Filial piety in particular, a virtue of respect for parents and other older people, is considered to be an important normative value

that determines intergenerational relations. Kabeer points out (2000: 465) that one important aspect of demographic transition 'is its influence on how relationships between parents and children play out in these different phases, particularly on how parents view their obligations to their children and what they expect in return'. She introduces the concept of 'implicit contracts' within the family, which stipulates that parents look after their children when they are young and in return expect support and care in old age.

The traditional family model in South Asia, and for a large part of Nepal's population, is generally described as an extended or joint family (*ṭhulo ghar*) living under one roof, comprising parents, unmarried daughters and sons, married sons with their wives and children in co-residence, and in some cases even the grandchildren's wives (Bista 1967, Michaels 2020: 287). A patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal kinship structure dominates in South Asia. In Nepal, women leave their parents' home (*māītī ghar*) after marriage to move to their husband's parents' place of residence (*ghar*). The multi-generational household is headed by the eldest male who directs, coordinates and controls the household members and manages resources (eg property or labour) to maintain the whole family's livelihood (Goldstein and Beall 1986, Macfarlane 1976, Michaels 2020: 287). Male adult children are expected to be the first main provider of social and financial support for their parents in old age (intergenerational contract). Of course, the diverse ethnic groups and castes in Nepal adhere to their respective family models and family-related customary rights, and these values and norms characterise the family. Nevertheless, there have always been childless persons and parents with only daughters. These family compositions, which have always been stigmatised, are considered to pose the greatest risk and to disadvantage older people today (Michaels 2020: 297).

### *The downfall of the joint family?*

Over the last decades, South Asia has witnessed the decline of the traditional joint family and of the norms and values attributed to it. In the early 1970s and 1980s, Cowgill and Holmes (1974, 1972) theorised that the status of older people in society and in the family generally declines with increasing modernisation. A common assumption prevails that 'modernisation', that is Western ideas and values about family

composition but also emerging concepts of modern living arrangements and lifestyles and increased individualism, weakens the intergenerational relationship between parents and children (eg Bhandari and Titzmann 2017). Hence, they erode societal values and jeopardise the traditional welfare system for older people. A parent's pay-off in later life in the form of support and care from their children is obviously begrudged in these times of socio-economic change (Martin 1990, Subedi 2005). In the early 1980s Goldstein and Beall (1981, 1982, 1986) described changes in family patterns in rural villages of Lamjung district as being the result of migration and modernisation. Sons who became financially independent started their own households, challenging the sacrosanct power of the eldest male in the family. The idea that the loss of the traditional family and general societal change aggravate old people's lives is clearly stated in the above-cited publications. By contrast, Korzenevica and Agergaard (2017: 135) stress the fact that relations and arrangements within the family and household constantly change. Hence, traditional practices are not at risk but shift. Focusing on Brahmanlically influenced North India and Nepal, Michaels (2020) questions the statement that the situation of older people in general was much better in the past. Notions in Sanskrit texts indicate that the rejection and poor treatment of old people, particularly in joint Hindu families, are not recent phenomena and are solely a consequence of modernity or Westernisation but are 'rooted in a structural ritual separation or, in some cases, even exiling [...] old people due to the traditional *āśrama* system[2] – one of the strong spiritual pillars of Hinduism' (Michaels 2020: 301).

At this point let us bear in mind that, compared to the past, an important change has indeed taken place: today people live longer and have fewer children, resulting in the ageing of the population. This demographic development, further intensified by outmigration, has also contributed to a decrease in the size of households over the last two or three decades. Whereas households with five or more persons dominated until the 1980s, subsequent censuses show an increase in smaller households. The average household size dropped from 5.8 persons in 1981 to 4.6 in 2015-16, the four-person household now being

2 The *āśrama* system according to which high-caste male Hindus should live a life according to four phases, the last two phases stipulating the withdrawal of old people from active work and their independence from their family (Michaels 2020: 289f).

the most prevalent size (19.92% of all households) (GoN 2017a). Having fewer children is attributed to an increase in the schooling of girls and to an older age at which women marry and give birth to their first child (see Ghimire and Axinn 2006: 181, 193).

The report *Progress of Women in Nepal 1995–2015* (Pudasaini 2015) also reveals that Nepal's constitutional and legal frameworks now regard more favourably gender equality and women's rights, as evidenced for example by the changes made to inheritance laws: the interim constitution of 2007 guaranteed a daughter equal rights to parental property for the first time. The proportion of households where women own land doubled from 2001 to 2011 to reach 20% (Pudasaini 2015: 167).

These achievements by women and their improved position in society contribute to the loosening of traditional rules such as patrilocality or the dominance of the eldest male at the head of the household. And migration is regarded as an important catalyst. The absence of a husband and male relatives has led to a larger number of female-headed households (eg Kaspar 2005). According to the annual household survey of 2015–16, 24.8% of households were run by female members (GoN 2017a).

To sum up the current situation based on the literature discussed here, shrinking households, a reduced number of family members due to migration and the change in the daughter-in-law's social status, combined with a growing proportion of old people, represent a major challenge in terms of family-based care for older people. Implicit contracts between parents and adult children need to be renegotiated, while changes in the family composition that disadvantage older people call for a review of new forms of care but also of new roles and norms (especially gender roles and norms) within the family. In this ongoing negotiation process, older people represent a negotiating party with different needs and life concepts compared with other family members. As we will see further on, it is the elderly who lament both the loss of the traditional family and change in general. As the saying goes, things were better back then.

Indeed, we do not discuss in a balanced manner the overall perspectives but disclose only old people's views. We regard this as a necessary contribution to initiating further debate on the issue. However, we also consider the transformation of the social status of young women

and daughters-in-law who are often accused of the decline in care and support in the South Asian context, '(...) because women have learned to go out' (Lamb 2000: 92).

## Changing family compositions in the middle hills of western Nepal: old people's perceptions

This section reveals old people's experiences and shows how they perceive changes and transformations within the family due to demographic and socio-economic changes. Following the introductory part on the description of fieldwork and applied methods, we first look into old people's current living arrangements and then present the assessment made by older villagers of the role and status of women, especially of the daughter-in-law. Respondents' thoughts on the once clearly defined shifting roles and responsibilities within the family are subsequently revealed. The last section discusses how old people assess the perceived changing attitudes of young people towards them.

### *Fieldwork and applied methods*

Empirical case study data from the middle hills of western Nepal was used for the following empirical sections. The study was conducted in four different rural Village Development Committees (VDC)[3] in Kaski district (Ghachowk, Machhapuchhare, Parche and Namarjung VDC) and on one site in Syangja district (Thuladihi VDC), both located in Gandaki province. The region's long history of migration dates back to the early nineteenth century when the British Indian army began to recruit from the ethnic Gurung and Magar groups (eg Macfarlane 1976). Since the 1990s in particular, international migration has increased both in terms of numbers and patterns. In 2012, 49.7% of households in Syangja district were missing members and 32.3% in Kaski district (GoN 2012: 38). Officially recorded absentees from the district's total population amount to 17.5% in Syangja and to 11.6% in Kaski (GoN 2014: 227).

Various ethnic and caste groups inhabit the area, though Gurung, Chhetri, hill Brahmin and Dalit are the largest groups. Livelihood strategies and income sources include farm work such as subsistence farming, livestock and commercial crop production, as well as non-

3 We refer to the old administrative and political terms as used by interviewees in 2016 and 2017.

agricultural activities like running a small business (eg tea shops). Remittances play a vital role in ensuring a livelihood (eg Seddon et al 2002).

Semi-structured problem-centred interviews (Witzel and Reiter 2012) were conducted with older villagers, focusing on a set of topics related to ageing and life in old age. For the purposes of this article, we only took into account data that serves to illustrate old people's views on changes in their family and village. Interviews took place in informal settings, either at respondents' homes or during a chance encounter on the road. Random purposeful sampling (Patton 1990) was applied to determine a selection of people aged 60 years or above who originated from eight different castes and ethnic groups.

The whole sample for the study consisted of 71 older villagers: 29 female and 42 male interviewees[4] of ages ranging from 57 to 97 years.[5] Their castes and ethnic groups included: Gurung (18), Brahmin (15), Dalit (12), Chhetri (10), Magar (9), Tamang (4), Newar (2) and Maithil (1). Most respondents were married, 25 were widowed, three separated from their spouse and one single. All had children with the exception of two respondents. Three quarters of interviewees reported at least one adult child or grandchild who had migrated. Of these 54 cases, 44 respondents reported having family members abroad and, in the other ten cases, within Nepal. During data collection, migrants were for the most part absent.

Two group discussions took place using a simple participatory visual method to comprehend local people's perceptions of various institutions, individuals and programmes (Kumar 2002). Empirical data was collected during the months of autumn 2016 and 2017. All interviews, with few exceptions, were conducted in Nepali, recorded with the respondents' permission and translated into English with the help of a field assistant. Text data was then analysed by the structured content analysis method according to Mayring (2010).

4 There were fewer female participants than male participants because women feel intimidated giving interviews and refuse to share their experiences. And they go out of their homes more often than men (to the market or to work in their fields).

5 Only one woman was younger than 60. She was desperate to give an interview and insisted on taking part as a 'grandmother and old woman'.

## Shrinking households and incomplete families

What are living arrangements in rural hill villages like today? In the case-study area, the majority of families may be labelled 'incomplete' (Macfarlane 1976). Living and household arrangements change as people, mostly young men but also increasingly women, migrate or move away from their native village. Most young adults who migrate leave on a contract to work abroad for several months if not years.

The living arrangements of the old people in the study (see Table 1) show that coresidence with at least one child still prevails (49 of 71 cases). Of these, 29 live in a three-generation household and the others in a two-generation household. However, it is worth noting that altogether one third of all respondents live in a single-generation household, consisting of people of the same age group: either a spouse (11 cases), kin and non-kin adults (1 case),[6] or alone (10 cases). One- or two-generation households are characterised by smaller households. Twenty-two respondents have separate households but, in 10 cases, their children still live nearby (see Figure 1). In two of these 22 households, the kitchen used by older family members is separate from the other kitchen, though the other rooms are shared equally (see Figure 2). Financial resources are managed separately in these two cases. The remaining interviewees talked about pooling money from remittances, their old age allowance[7] or other income sources.

The traditional patrilocal family model prevailed. Only one Gurung interviewee lived in his own daughter's household. Several older respondents reported that some of their children lived in Pokhara and that they commuted on-and-off between their village and the town. Their main reasons for going to Pokhara were to look after or to spend time with their grandchildren and to benefit from urban infrastructures and services, mainly health care. One older woman had moved from the Tarai to a village in the hills to stay with her youngest son who works in Kaski district. Another of her sons lived in Banke district with his family. She therefore commuted between Kaski and Banke.

6 In this case, two sisters lived together, sharing the house with people with whom they had no kinship ties.

7 Old age allowance (or senior citizen's allowance): the Nepalese social pension scheme comprises a monthly cash transfer (2,000 Nepalese rupees = 16.65 US Dollars) and is unconditionally available to all people aged 70 years and above, and for Dalits from 60 years and above. In rural areas of the country, it is usually distributed every four months.

A few respondents mentioned the possibility of following their children to a new place of residence; however, none of them would have preferred this option to living in their husband's ancestral village.[8] Gautam (2008: 149f) makes similar observations in nearby Galkot (Baglung District) where old people left behind in the village do not wish to move away from their homes but hope that their children will return to the village in the future.

| **Kaski and Syangja districts** | **Total sample (n=71)** | **Total sample (%)** |
|---|---|---|
| **Co-residence** | **49** | **69%** |
| 2-generation household[a] | 19 | 26.76% |
| 2-generation household[b] | 1 | 1.40% |
| 3-generation household | 29 | 40.84% |
| **With spouse only** | **11** | **15.49%** |
| **Alone**[c] | **10** | **14.10%** |
| **With adult relative(s) only** | **1** | **1.41%** |
| **Total** | **71** | **100.00%** |

a Person lived with at least one child, son or daughter-in-law
b Person lived with daughter and son-in-law
c Person had a child living nearby, in an urban area, or was childless.

**Table 1:** Living arrangements of older respondents in the five villages of Kaski and Syangia District.

These figures represent a snapshot and do not prove that there is an established trend. However, the topic of shrinking households and of incomplete families has always been a subject of conversation with old people. 'Joint families break into different small families' (Group discussion 1, 2016) – this issue was also largely addressed in group discussions. A few participants bemoaned the loss of *gharko vātāvaraṇ* [house environment] due to the family no longer being intact or complete. By 'environment', they mean receiving proper treatment

8 As data collection was limited to the villages, we have no data for older people who moved to town.

and mutual support from their adult children and food that is prepared for the whole family using the same kitchen. Both women and men expressed a feeling of regret and of the loss of a multi-generational household living under the same roof. However, male respondents were more wistful when talking about their past life. One old man reported:

> I've already told you that old people do not receive care and affection like in the past. (...) In the past, if you asked [people] what the condition was then – it would be as follows: old people used to stay at home with their son and daughter-in-law. Children used to care for their parents. They used to cook together and share everything, provide something good from time to time, insofar as they were able to. But at present, everyone has gone to towns for a job, education and to do business on their own. (Interview 155, 2016)

Separate households of a smaller size are not only the result of increased mobility and migration of the young to urban areas and abroad for education purposes and work opportunities: this phenomenon also correlates with the changing role of women. The following section

**Figure 1:** An old ex-Gorkha Gurung soldier lives with his wife in a longhouse under the same roof as his relatives, but in separate households (Ghachowk, 2018, U. Müller-Böker)

reveals the consequences of these developments on women's status, in particular the status of the daughter-in-law.

**Figure 2:** An 82-year-old Brahmin woman stands in front of her house explaining that her three sons (1 married with 3 children, 2 with a disability) live under the same roof but have separate kitchens (Ghachowk, 2016, S. Speck)

## The shifting social status of women and daughters-in-law

How do old people perceive the transformation of the socio-economic status of women and especially of the daughter-in-law? As mentioned in the literature review, reports and publications show that women's social status has improved inside and outside the family and that many young women challenge the daughter-in-law's traditionally ascribed role and duties. The following critical statements in this section, which were made by old people, reflect this change.

Some respondents shared the view that, contrary to the situation in the past, their daughters-in-law would not help with household chores and agricultural work. They preferred to look after themselves and their children. Besides, an increasing number of married women have taken up paid employment in urban areas (see Speck 2017). Furthermore, moving to an urban area presents the possibility of ensuring an education for their children. A 66-year-old woman from Tanting described the changes:

> Most of them [her sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren] have migrated. I think society is changing these days. It is good for them as they get good jobs and education there. I don't think they go there in vain, I believe they get good jobs. And their children, they stay in student hostels for their education and studies. We cannot afford everything that our children and grandchildren demand, so our children have to work too. (Interview 63, 2017)

Respondents talked rather unwillingly about the conflicts between their children and their respective partners and their failed relationships, yet it became obvious that broken relationships between daughters-in-law and their husbands, who had migrated, led to the decision either to separate or to move away completely from the husband's home and village (see also Yamanaka 2005). In ten cases in our study, daughters-in-law either set up a separate household nearby or moved away from their in-laws' place of residence. Intergenerational conflicts too may lead to the decision to leave (see Thieme et al 2011: 66). A 72-year-old man complained about quarrelling with one of his sons who lived at home. When the altercations became too much to bear for both parties, his son moved away with his family to another place. A 70-year-old man complained about his daughter-in-law who had decided to live with her parents soon after she gave birth, instead of living with him and helping him with household and agricultural work while his son was away in India. The old people in our sample were intimidated by their daughters-in-law's new self-confidence and decision-making power, especially in the absence of their husbands. Old women in particular mentioned how they struggled with their daughters-in-law's modes of communication and behaviour, as described by this 73-year-old Brahmin woman:

> Everyone is doing that: they have left their old parents at home. In the past, we had to follow the orders given by our in-laws, our husband. But now, instead, we have to be careful about what our daughter-in-law tells us. We are afraid of what our son will think about us. Today everything is the other way around. In our time, back then, we had to obey the orders of our elders, our parents and our in-laws. But today, we have to obey whatever our daughters-in-law say. We have to do whatever they say. Daily activities and who should do what are

> now assigned by our daughter-in-law, and we have to eat what she provides. We can't discuss this with them as they are familiar with the modern world, new rules and technologies. These days, we older people are daman [dominated]. They [daughters-in-law] dominate mothers-in-law. (Interview 59, 2017)

According to many female respondents, daughters-in-law behave increasingly badly and ignore traditional roles (see Bhandari and Titzmann 2017). Male respondents were somewhat disappointed about these changes. Several older men were not at all satisfied with the recent transformation and emancipation of women. A 60-year-old man expressed his concern as follows:

> When women start to talk more, I don't feel good, I feel uncomfortable (*sahaj mahasus gardina*). When women talk about their rights and everything, how can I, a man, be satisfied? They should speak and behave politely, and speak only to a certain extent, not too much. (Interview 141, 2016)

He explained that he felt discriminated and marginalised when female family members in his own household joined discussions and took part in important decisions. Others mentioned that women were breaking *parampar*ā [tradition rules]. In one case, a male respondent talked about his sister's family where a relative had recently passed away. Both the daughter and son of the deceased organised the funeral instead of only the male family members as dictated by tradition. The respondent was unwilling to understand this new practice.

The daughter-in-law's role and responsibilities within the family are highly contested. The older generation deplores the reversal of hierarchical positions, particularly between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. Moreover, the old women and men in this study barely acknowledged or understood what the international development agenda has defined as a central goal, the empowerment of women. They associate the daughter-in-law's changing role with less care and attention towards their generation.

***Shifting roles and responsibilities***

The majority of our respondents mentioned that ageing made them less mobile and thus more housebound and confined to walking shorter distances around the house. While 17 respondents complained that age-related afflictions such as poor eyesight, pain in their joints, problems walking and other physical ailments prevented them from contributing to household chores or work in the fields, the others said that they still helped in the household, taking care of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, collecting firewood, foraging, gardening and carrying out agricultural work. The redistribution of household chores and agricultural work among those remaining at home during the absence of migrant family members was particularly highlighted by respondents. How are the redistributed and renegotiated responsibilities and the shift in roles among family members viewed by older people?

In cohabiting households (which represent 69% of our sample), the son was mainly responsible for managing financial and other material resources. 'My sons manage everything. And sometimes we ask how they manage, but they reply that is not necessary for us to know how they manage' (Interview 58, 2017). This Brahmin woman complained that, unlike in the past, her adult children would not ask her for advice nor tell her husband or herself about any decisions they made. Data shows that roles that used to be clearly defined – such as taking responsibility and making decisions concerning material and financial resources – are changing. Older respondents reported that the role of the head of the household and the associated authority are now assumed by those bringing in financial resources, mostly in the form of remittances. In the absence of adult sons, their wives – daughters-in-law – often hold managerial positions and administer the finances (see Maharjan et al 2012: 117 ff, Gram et al 2018). It appears that, given their dwindling share of household chores and economic contribution, older family members are increasingly being deprived of their say in household matters.

These changes in the family composition, the new distribution of roles and recent laws in favour of gender equality have affected other traditional rules. Transferring and dividing land among male offspring used to be common practice. However, in our case study we observed different forms of intra-household landownership.

Forty-nine of the 71 respondents said they owned land: of these 49

respondents, 25 lived in co-residence. Twenty of the 71 respondents confided that they were economically active, gardening, farming and raising livestock on their own land, and two respondents, one Dalit and one Chhetri, reported that they worked on land that belonged to somebody else. Six of the 20 respondents said that their land was tilled by tenants (see Speck 2017); four had already transferred their land to their sons; and three respondents stated that they shared land equally with their offspring (see Table 2).

The remaining 22 of the 71 respondents had either no land at all (13 cases) or only a tiny garden (1 case) or knew nothing about their land tenure (8 cases).

Of the 13 respondents with no land, four were Dalits, three Gurungs, three Magars, one Tamang, one Maithil and one Brahmin. Eight of the 13 were widowed. This reflects the fact that single (widowed or separated) persons and Dalits in particular possess fewer physical resources. In our sample, there are one and a half times more widows than widowers. One possible explanation for landlessness among widows is that in the past they had no right to their husband's property (Michaels 2020: 297 ff). Four of the 13 respondents were not locals but had migrated from other places and had not purchased land.

Eight respondents out of the 22 reported not knowing how much land they actually had. However, six of those said that their sons or hired labour worked the land or that is was left barren.

| Land-owner | Respon-dent him-/ herself | Spouse (m/f) | Work on somebody else's land | Shared with children | Trans-ferred to son(s) | Total land-owners |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 27/5 | 8/0 | 2 | 3 | 4 | **49** |

**Table 2:** Landownership of the 49 respondents in the study.

In old age, land is commonly equated with a safety deposit. Handing down land to ones descendants once guaranteed that the younger generation cared for their elders in old age. This was referred to by interviewees and discussed in one of the group discussions (see also Speck 2017). An 87-year-old Chhetri man expressed this very clearly:

> Sons don't talk to their parents if they [parents] don't provide a son's share of the property. They won't care about their parents. (...) This is happening not only here in my family but everywhere, in everybody's family. This is the kind of experience and feeling people have today. That's why old people complain about their children, that their children do not care about them, or support and provide them with food. (Interview 155, 2016)

His statement shows that land is an important aspect in terms of security, authority and intergenerational relations in the family. This opinion is still widespread and embedded in old people's minds. In the 1980s Goldstein and Beall already observed the dilemma whereby, once property had been transferred to the sons still living in the household, members of the older generation became 'a powerless appendage to the son's household' in a way that forced them 'to relinquish their independence and diminish their self-esteem as well as economic and authority status' (Goldstein and Beall 1982: 747).

Only a few interviewees said they realised that land is no longer as important because there are other economic sources and strategies, other than via agriculture, for earning a living these days. However, other scholars have reported the growing abandonment of agricultural work, with an increase in the amount of land that is left fallow and in forest coverage, showing that farmland has lost its importance (Jaquet et al 2016, B. KC et al 2017, N. R. Khanal and Watanabe 2006, Niraula 1995, Speck 2017). In rural Nepal, the value of farmland, which is an important pledge of the tacit intergenerational contract in the hands of older people, has decreased considerably.

***Less respect and appreciation***

How do older people assess young people's changing attitudes towards them? In addition to shifting responsibilities and roles, interviewees underlined the fact that they were shown less respect and esteem. The following reflections made by an 87-year-old Chhetri man express these changes very clearly:

> The son and daughter-in-law should feel obliged to look after and care for their parents when they become old. At present, we

> haven't seen many of our adult children speaking or caring about their parents. They think that their parents have grown old and are too old to continue to work. (...) Their [adult children's] view and mindset focus only on present issues, not on future problems. (...) The younger generations will not follow *paramparāgat cālcalan* [traditional behaviour]. Very few will follow this, because the majority are (now) following the Western culture. (...) Instead of caring for us older people and trying to understand our feelings, our children criticise us and ask us what older people do for them [as they are physically incapable of working anymore]. (Interview 155, 2016)

The old man remarked on the growing individualism among young people at the expense of familial ties and reciprocal intergenerational support. The majority of interviewees shared similar views: for example, an 83-year-old woman who remembered having shown utmost respect and provided assistance to her elders and to her own parents. However, 'today it is no longer the same with the young generation', she said. Some respondents formulated the unfulfilled expectations they had of their own children. Statements such as, 'I expect that. It would be good if they looked after us, fed us, provided us with facilities, comfort' (interview 164, 2016) were frequently heard. They felt that they received less care and support compared with their parents. Male interviewees in particular reflected about the deviating behaviour of the young who do not act according to their expectations. Older respondents acknowledged their declining social status within the family but also in the community. For example, an 85-year-old man said that he had noticed that young people even avoided direct contact and no longer spoke to him.

The fear of exile (see Michaels 2020) and of being driven out of their own homes by their children was present in a few conversations. However, none of the interviewees had undergone such an experience, but they referred to stories they had heard in the village. Many were worried that a trend towards scorning and disregarding old people had become the norm. However, there was the hope that children 'remember that the parents raised them, made great efforts to care for them when they were children' (interview 66, 2017). A 68-year-old father of four daughters expected the latter to look after him in old age even though

he knew they had paid jobs and had to fulfil their duty towards their in-laws and that these things were not in keeping with the tradition of daughters assuming this responsibility.

Respondents experienced, for the most part verbally, the change in attitude towards old people in society. Some respondents also noted a downward trend in caring behaviour, respectful interactions, and financial and emotional support. Ageism, unacceptable behaviour and attitudes, and even physical abuse of old persons were reported in certain cases and confirmed by other studies (eg Speck 2017, Rai et al 2018). Indeed, when asked about any misbehaviour or ill-treatment by younger people towards them, only 12 of the 71 respondents said that they had never been treated badly. This applied to their own children but also to other people who used to speak politely and to show respect and appreciation towards them.

The present empirical findings are not explicit evidence of an increase in verbal or physical mistreatment of old people by the younger generation. However, the fact that virtually all respondents shared the same experiences and views showed clear dissatisfaction and perceived neglect on their part.

## Concluding remarks

This study reveals the views of older people on current changes in family composition, the intergenerational contract and the transformation of roles – triggered by rapid demographic change, outmigration of younger generations and socio-economic change in rural remote villages of the hill region of western Nepal. Having seen their lives significantly affected by the intertwining of these three major processes – demographic transition, migration and socio-economic change –, older people have entered a transition phase.

This transition is manifested by the current wide range of older people's living arrangements. The majority of households (53 of 71) have absent members. Co-residence with at least one child still prevails. However, one third of respondents live in a single-generation household. According to our data, the traditional concept of patrilocality whereby the daughter-in-law moves into her husband's house (*ghar*) largely prevails. Nevertheless, we assume that it is also only a matter of time before this practice changes. Smaller households and the nucleation of

families with fewer children not only derive from the increasing mobility of the younger generations but also result from women's changing role, which reorients the social fabric of families.

The role and responsibilities of the daughter-in-law, especially within families receiving remittances, have grown. Many young women openly represent their own interests and those of their children. And in many cases, it can be assumed that the relationship between spouses has evolved into a partnership. However, this empowerment of women is not to the liking of the older generation because it clearly threatens the system of support and care for them (see also Yarger and Brauner-Otto 2014).

Ageing means that the ability to work and mobility are on the decline. The absence of family members who have migrated also leads to a redistribution of household chores and agricultural work among those who are left behind. Younger family members are increasingly taking over the reins of power by assuming responsibility and managing financial and material resources, especially those who bring in or receive financial resources, mostly in the form of remittances.

As previously mentioned, land is of great importance to old people as it is seen as a safety deposit. Those, who do not possess land, in our case Dalits but also widowed or separated men and women, cannot fall back on this asset. Yet the increase in the amount of fallow land and in forest coverage shows that agricultural land has lost much of its value. Furthermore, the new inheritance law that ensures a daughter equal rights to parental property (GoN 2017b) will shape future generational and gendered power relations, and will contribute to a dissolution of patrilineal and patrilocal practices.

The empirical data here reveals that, on the whole, old people still cling on to traditional family life and to living in a joint family composition, and often reminisce about a rosier past. The majority are dissatisfied with the transformations that have affected the family unit and which they regard as negatively affecting their own lives and most importantly their welfare in old age. Several respondents expressed concern that soon only old people will be left in villages to look after young grandchildren, the house and the land, receiving very little or no care and support in their old age (see also Speck 2017).

In Nepal, demographic growth that results in an ageing society

goes hand in hand with societal change, which in turn entails changes in traditional care and support for old people. Hence, the latter find themselves in a precarious transitional phase in which the family as the basic social institution in old age is in danger and is falling apart. Living together as a family under one roof and benefitting from reciprocal intergenerational support can no longer be taken for granted. The intergenerational contract has to be adapted and renegotiated by considering the different needs and life concepts of all family members.

We have not balanced older people's statements and experiences against the perspective of younger people. We are fully aware of this one-sided view. Nonetheless, it is of utmost urgency to depict the perceptions of this specific social group, old people, as they have long been neglected and their voices left unheard in development and livelihood studies and, by and large, in research on population issues in the Global South. With regard to transferability, it needs to be borne in mind that Nepal, and especially the middle-hill region, is a particular case with regard to massive outmigration of the younger population. The voices of old people contribute to the overarching goal: to raise awareness about current and future challenges related to population ageing and family change, and about opportunities that call for political and societal response and negotiation of the intergenerational contract. Our research shows that several forms of development take place simultaneously and are inevitably entangled, changing the intergenerational contract and family living arrangements for older people.

Despite the pressing issue of filling the widening gap in support and care, and of meeting the needs of old people, the challenges and demands of an ageing society have not yet been properly anticipated nor fully recognised by most governments in the Global South. However, greater focus on ageing populations in politics and society is inevitable in view of the rapid demographic changes and continuous migration practices in countries of the Global South.

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